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## Pattern Research Project: Emblems of Colonialism - High Chest

Stephanie Wilburn

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High Chest







# Colonialism and the Americas: Pattern Research Project

Stephanie Wilburn

IDES 521/651

December 1, 2020



# Table of Contents

Pattern and Object Overview.....	3
People, Place, and Time.....	4
Role in the Interior.....	8
Craft .....	9
Pattern Design Analysis.....	11
Realizations and Reflections.....	12

# Pattern and Object Overview

<b>object name</b>	<i>High Chest</i>
<b>cabinetmaker</b>	<i>John Scottow, British, 1701 - 1790</i>
<b>japanner</b>	<i>Randle-Davis Group</i>
<b>pattern description</b>	<i>Japanned High Chest with Chinoiserie</i>
<b>location</b>	<i>Boston, Massachusetts, United States</i>
<b>date produced</b>	<i>1720 - 1730</i>
<b>item type</b>	<i>Furniture</i>
<b>materials</b>	<i>White pine; maple, painted, gessoed and gilded; brass pulls</i>
<b>culture</b>	<i>British Colony</i>
<b>colonizer</b>	<i>British</i>
<b>pattern motif</b>	<i>Chinoiserie Scene, Arabesque</i>

This William and Mary High Chest was fabricated in Boston, Massachusetts between 1720 - 1730. The surface of the furniture is decorated in the "Japanned" style popular in the British Colonies from 1700 to 1775. Japanning was a process first created and popularized in Europe designed to imitate the decorative ornament of Asian lacquers which were too expensive and difficult to work with to import to the West. Exposure to goods from Asia first through the Spanish and Portuguese exploration and then through trade from the Dutch East Indies Company drove the desire for "exotic" goods.



Image Source: American furniture from the Kaufman collection.

# Pattern and Object Overview

## **Question:**

How does this Japanned High Chest fabricated in colonial America reflect its time and place?

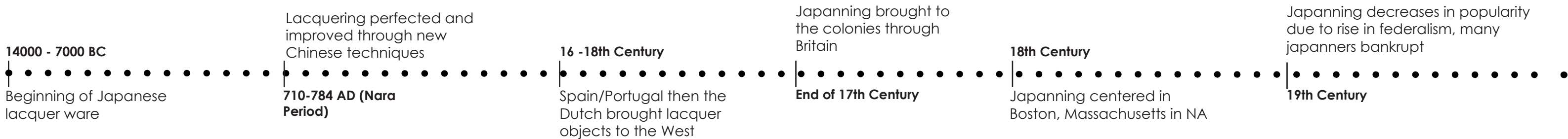
## **Thesis:**

Throughout the 1700s, as the colonies began to stabilize and prosper, a growing middle class started to place importance on displays of wealth, comfort, and the decorative arts. Colonists with means took cues from European trends driven by Monarchical tastes and commissioned furniture replicating what was popular in the colonial power. Adaptations to the European standards were made as needed to accommodate the limitations of manufacturing in the colony.



# People, Place, and Time - Japanning

## Japanese Lacquer ware and Japanning Timeline



## Japanese Lacquer ware and Japanning Map

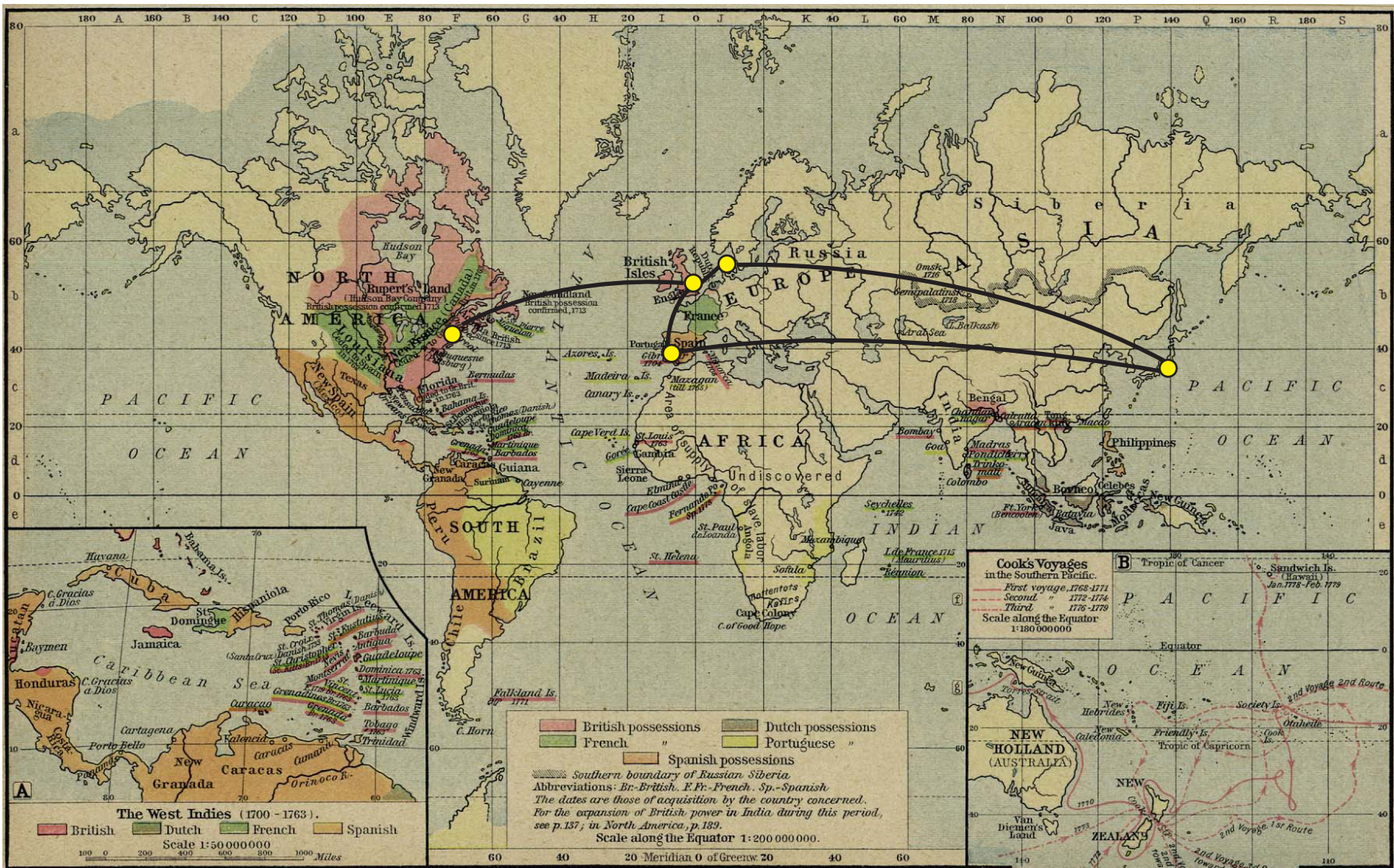


Image Source: The University of Texas -Texas at Austin Perry Castañeda Library Map Collection

## Key People involved in the spread of Japanning

The spread of Japanning started when in the 16th and 17th century the Spanish and the Portuguese made contact with Japan on christianity and trade missions. The Japanese were wary of these new visitors and eventually removed them from the country, but a unique trade agreement was created with the Dutch. The Dutch East Indies Company was allowed to maintain a presence on a man-made island called Deshima where Japan could control the type and amount of goods flowing between the West and the East.

This made the availability of Japanese lacquerware incredibly rare. It was of course then desired greatly by the nobility in Europe. Marie Antoinette's mother, the Empress of Austria, had one of the largests collections.

The restricted flow of goods and the difficulty of workign with truye Japanese lacquer meant a new craft called Japanning emerged. This was an imitation form of laquerware that could be more easily created. In 1688, Stalker and Parker published "The Treatise on Japanning" which gave great detail on the steps to create this imitation lacquerware. Japanning become a new art form for craftsmen and a hobby for young women.



# People, Place, and Time - Japanning

## Japanning in the Colonies

Japanning was brought to the British Colonies in three methods:

- Immigrant Craftsmen
- Furniture Imports
- Circulation of craft community publications (Treatise by Stalker and Parker in 1688)

Immigrant craftsman set up workshops and produced via the skills learned in the London Painter-Sculptor Guild. Often these craftsmen had to learn many additional trades (heraldry, painting, engraving, etc.) because demand was not as strong in the colonies. This resulted in deviations from European techniques and imagery. The craftsmen were highly-skilled and the work was very complex. Workshops were mini chemical labs with many complex instruments and materials. Boston, MA was the center of Japanning in the US.

Boston was one of the main centers of colonial life during this time. The city was very prosperous and was gaining a larger middle class interested in fine goods. Immigrants from England and France settled here bringing varied expertise and tastes.

The trade was impacted by British taxes and restrictions on exports/imports (Townshend Act) which altered or controlled the base materials that could be used.

Japanners were a separate craft from cabinet making. They often worked with local cabinet makers and clock makers to source unadorned base products. Customers would coordinate the production between cabinet maker and japanner.

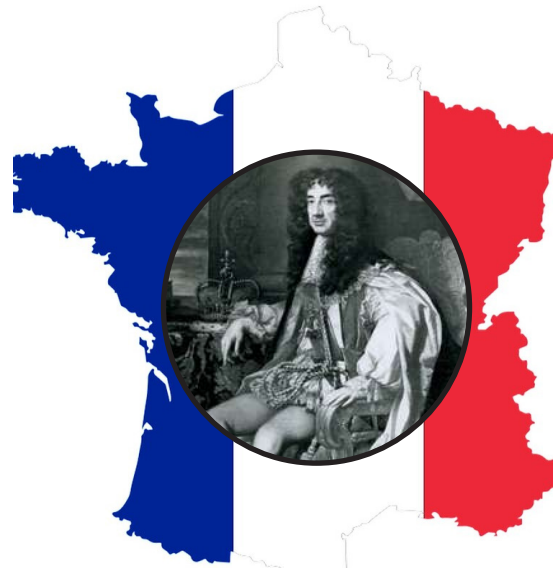




# People, Place, and Time - William and Mary Furniture

## Key People, Places, and Events

### 1660 - France/England



Charles II

- Restoration of Charles II, who had been in exile in France, brought to England a new design based on the court of Louis XIV
- Known as the early Baroque

### 1688 - Netherlands/England



William and Mary

- William came to the English throne from the house of Orange, encouraged many Dutch artisans to follow him
- Huguenot refugees from France worked in the cabinetmakers' and designers' shops of London

### 1690 - 1730 - Colonial America



- Colonists desired to remain stylistically competitive with England
- Colonies had become stable and wealthy enough to afford luxury furniture



# Role in the Interior

## Role

- The most impressive pieces of furniture a family would own
- Cabinetmakers used all of their skills to make these as grand as possible and reflective of all of their talent
- Used to display owner's good taste and wealth
- Displayed in the main bedchamber or sitting room
- Used for linens or clothing



Image Sources: The Metropolitan Museum of Art



# Craft - Japanning

## Process

1. Preparing the surface for application
2. Preparation on the paint by mixing pigment with binder
3. Application of paint (usually black) to the furniture
4. Creation of raised ornamentation using many layers of gesso
5. Gilding of raised and flat portions using metallic leaf and powders
6. Sealed with clear resin

## Materials

- Pigments
- Binders
- Animal Glue
- Chalk
- Metallic Powders and Leaf
- Resin

## Tools

- Camel hair brushes
- Pulverizers (bronze mortar and pestle)
- Weighing scales
- Color Mill
- Unadorned furniture

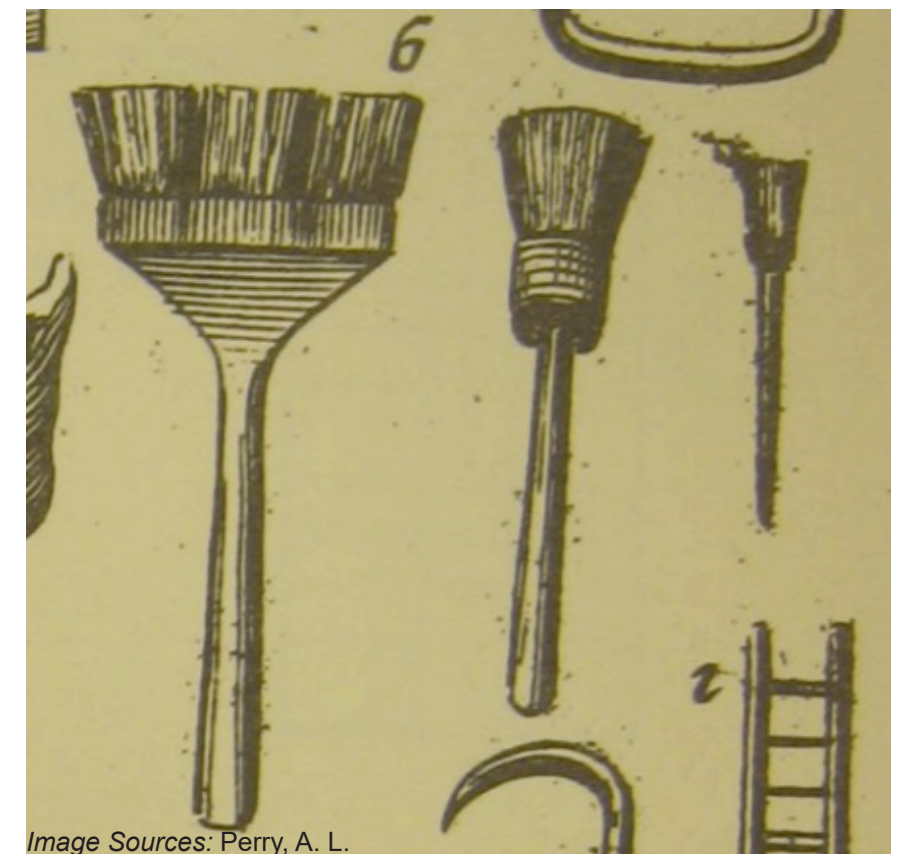
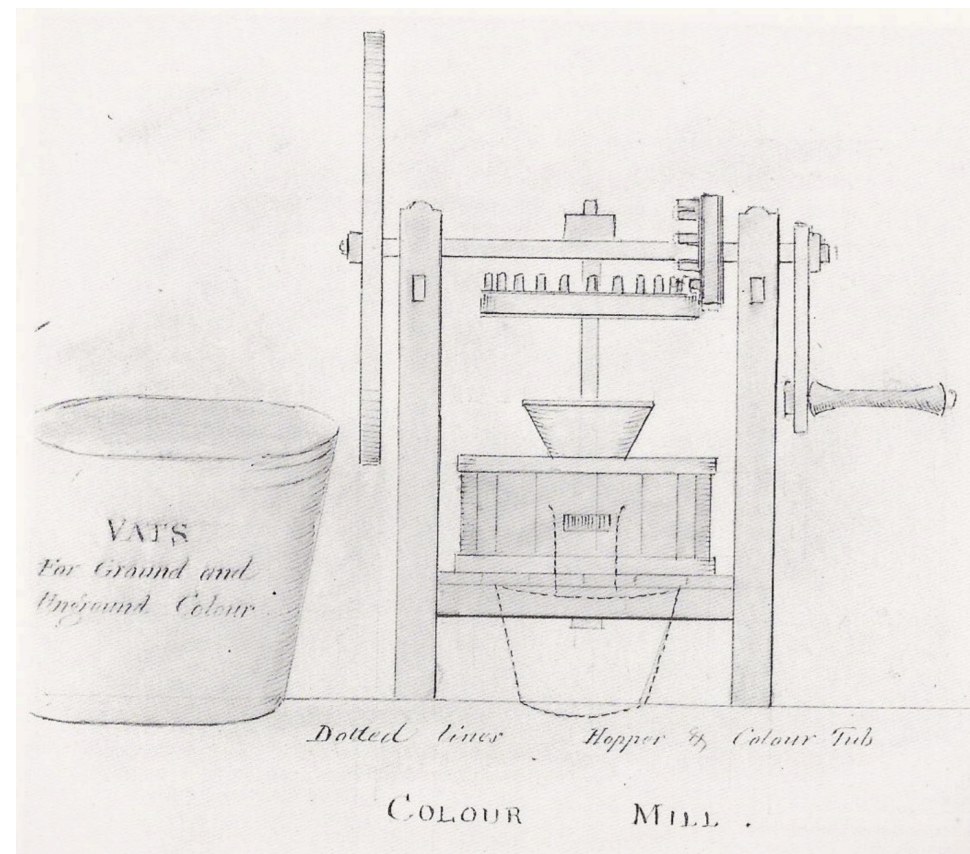


Image Sources: Perry, A. L.



# Craft - William and Mary Furniture

## Process

- Radical departure from furniture that had preceded it
- Preparation of raw materials - sawing stock, planing sawn boards flat and to an even thickness
- Turning the legs
- Dovetailing, sides and fronts are fastened with interlocking joints that resemble in shape the tail of a dove
- Initially resting chest of drawers on a stand
- More advanced examples integrate the chest, desk, and stand

## Tools

- Lathe
- Saws
- Carving Tools
- Augers
- Mortising chisels
- Planes (ogees, hollows and rounds, and plows)
- Axe

## Materials

- Pine
- Oak
- Walnut
- Maple
- Other native woods and some exotic woods
- Glue

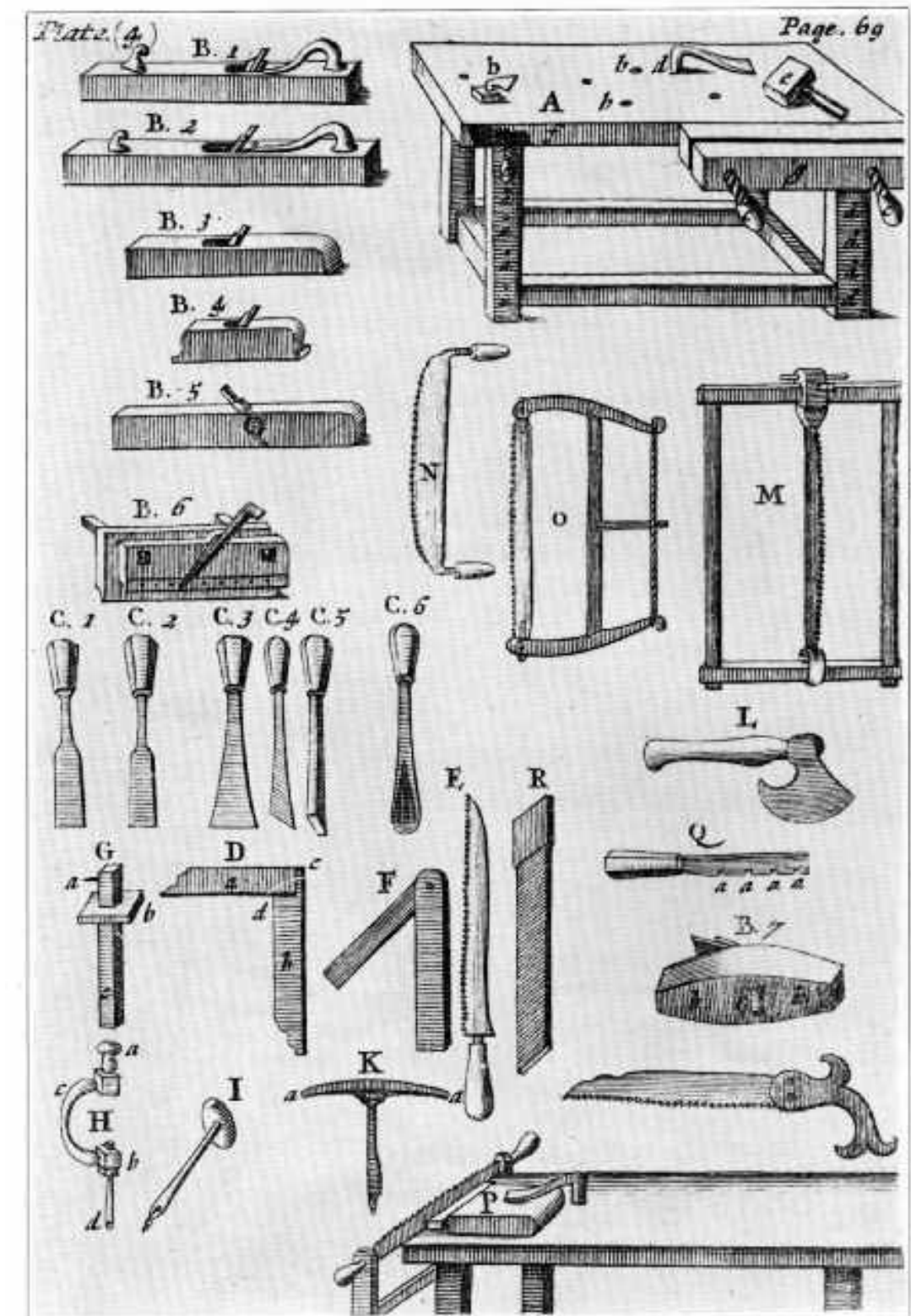


Image Source: The Project Gutenberg



# Analysis - Japanning

## Imagery Analysis

- Exoticism of China/Japan/India captivated westerners
  - Exposure from travel accounts, literature, and trade (silk, lacquer, etc.)
- Japanners in the colonies took motifs directly from engravings of Asia in Dutch and English Travelogues and trade publications
- Because many immigrant craftsmen had to take up multiple crafts, there was a mixing between heralders and japanners
- Japanned furniture also featured designs from Heraldry popular at the time (lions, dogs, cherubs)
- Japanned furniture also frequently featured Arabesques patterns drawing from the French Baroque especially along the cornices and paneling
  - Can be attributed to the Huguenot artisans who brought French Baroque and Rococo techniques to the colonies

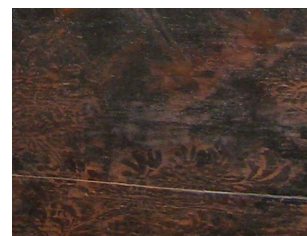
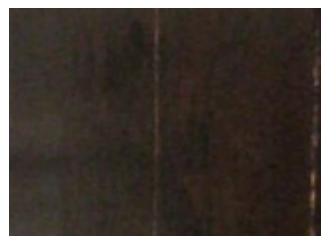
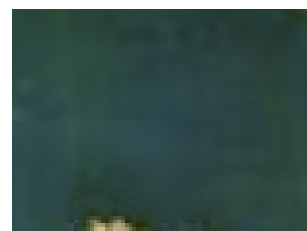


The front feet and rear legs of the elephant demonstrate how Japanners relied on both their existing knowledge and available examples for the chinoiserie imagery. Here we can see men in robes and an elephant likely taken from imported wares or craft publications and the influence of heraldry animals (lion feet).

## Color Analysis

Popular colors for Japanned furniture in the colonies took cues from the imported goods from Asia and were adapted based on availability in the colony or restrictions from the British.

- Black
- Tortoise Shell
- Blue
- Metallic



Arabesque patterns along the cornice and mid-molding similar to designs featured in the French Huguenot Jean Berger, design book on French Baroque style.

Image Sources: Perry, A. L., VMFA





# Analysis - William and Mary High Chest

## High Chest Analysis



Elaborate cornice to draw attention to height and verticality

Drawers are progressively larger closer to the ground

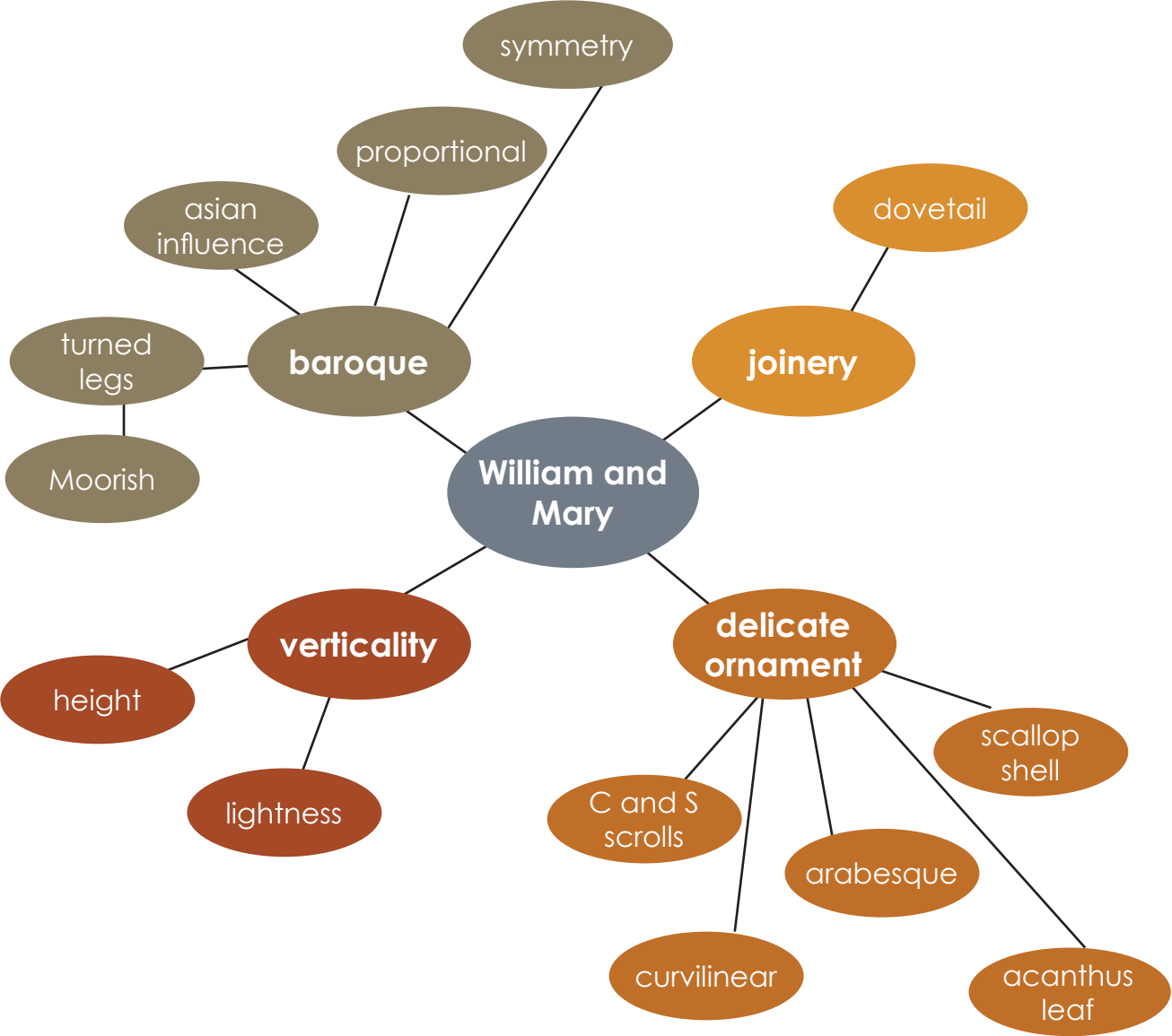
Uppercase is nearly square  
Image Source: Perry, A. L.

Middle drawer half the height of side drawers

Stretchers mimic the shape above in the apron

Image Source: MFA

## William and Mary Key Attributes





# Realizations and Reflections

## Realizations and Reflections

- Taste Europe was driven by the Monarchical powers and heavily influenced by recent access eastern goods
- The desire for eastern goods was largely for status
- Fashion was passed from the Monarch to the elite class in Britain and eventually to the newly elite classes in the New World
- As with many other aspects of life, adaptations were made in the colonies either due to rules imposed by the British or realities of life in the colonies
- I found little to no evidence of influence from the native people of America on colonial furniture making or taste
- Many Chinoiserie scenes used in Japanning or other decorative arts during the time held little real resemblance to China, India, or Japan

## Next Questions

- What were the impacts of “invented” scenes used in chinoiserie on English colonists and future U.S. citizens thoughts and perceptions of the people and places in Japan, China, India, etc.?

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